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ABSTRACT

The paper describes six skills that can be used to improve the reading comprehension of learning disabled students. The skills can be utilized in a reading program or with reading in a content area. Examples from particular models of instruction are provided as well as a rationale for each. The skills may be used either individually, as a cooperative learning experience with a partner, or one on one with a teacher or tutor. Strategies are: (1) The K-W-L strategy (identifying prior knowledge and desired learning prior to reading and obtained learning after reading); (2) Semantic mapping (visual relating of themes, concepts and facts); (3) Paired repeated reading (the fluency in decoding gained by repetition allows concentration on comprehension); (4) Rapid decoding with flashcards; (5) Modified neurological impress method (teacher and student read rapidly in unison after standard pre-reading activities and before standard skill development and enrichment activities); and (6) visual imagery and verbal mediation (the student deliberately creates a mental picture of his reading and asks himself content questions). (DB)

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Six Strategies For Teaching Reading Comprehension To Learning Disabled Students

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Six Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension to Learning Disabled Students

Reading is a complex process which incorporates many different skills, one of the most important being comprehension. Reading for comprehension is a skill that is difficult for many, but learning disabled students in particular have a more difficult time than most. In many cases, learning disabled students have problems retaining and recalling information and lack the necessary skills needed to help them relate what they have read to prior knowledge and life experiences. Teachers of learning disabled students need to be aware of the specific strategies that researchers have developed in the area of reading comprehension and apply them in their classrooms. If true comprehension is to be accomplished, the learning disabled student must get beyond decoding and achieve the ultimate goal of gaining meaning from the printed text.

The purpose of this paper is to describe six skills that can be used to improve reading comprehension for learning disabled students. The skills can be utilized in a reading program or with reading in a content area. Examples from particular models of instruction are provided as well as a rationale for each. The skills described may be used: (1) individually; (2) as a cooperative learning experience with a partner; and (3) one on one with a teacher or tutor.

Strategy #1 - The K-W-L Strategy

Rationale. Researchers agree that prior knowledge is essential if comprehension is to be achieved. Despite the reseach highlighting the importance of prior knowledge, too many times little attention is paid to what children bring into the reading lesson (Ogle, 1986). The K-W-L method is a simple, instructional tool that allows the teacher to assist students in accessing what they already know about a subject with what they would like to learn and ultimately connect this information to what they have learned. The K-W-L model is a useful skill for learning disabled students because it is an easy three step

procedure where the teacher models the importance of calling to mind prior experiences to the reading lesson. Ogle (1986) has found that this procedure can be utilized with non-fiction selections at any grade level, in a reading group or content lesson.

Procedure. In order for the students to fully understand the steps of this strategy, Ogle developed a worksheet (Fig. 1) which is used as they brainstorm ideas together and as they read the selection silently.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Step 1 - What I Know (K Step)

In this step, students verbalize what they know about the topic before reading it. Each response is put on the board and the students brainstorm as much as possible about the topic. Simultaneously, they fill in their worksheets. The second part of this step involves categorizing what is on the board. This is an important organizational strategy helpful to the student when reading, but often a difficult task for a learning disabled student. The teacher might direct the students in the following manner: "Let's think about what might be included in this reading. Look at what we already know. Can anyone group some of these things into a category?" If no one responds, the teacher models a response by providing the students with an example. She would then put her response under the heading "categories" and again the students would use their worksheets. After additional examples, the students begin to think of categories on their own.

Step 2 - What Do I Want To Learn? (W Step)

After looking over what they already know about the topic and the categories of information they will be looking for, students talk about the questions they have. This step is conducted as a group activity, with the

teacher playing the central role. She needs to highlight gaps in information and differences of opinions and helps the students formulate their questions. Before reading the selection, students write questions on their worksheets that they are most interested in having answered. While reading the selection, they actively look for the answers.

Step 3 - Information I Have Learned (L Step)

When the students have finished reading the selection, they are instructed to write on their worksheets what they have learned. It is important that they cross-check what they learned with the questions they wrote down. If their questions have not been answered, the teacher should suggest further reading such as other books on the same topic, which the teacher might have available for the student. This would encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, and also foster additional interest in the subject.

The K-W-L model has proven to be successful in informal evaluations when students began using the strategy independently (Ogle, 1986).

Strategy #2 - Semantic Mapping

Rationale. Semantic mapping is a tool used by many teachers in many different content areas. Mapping improves comprehension by showing the relationship between ideas and characters in a visually graphic way. Because learning disabled students usually have problems storing and recalling information, semantic mapping is a particularly useful strategy. Sinatra, Stahl- Gemake and Berg (1984) conducted a study in which several different semantic maps were used with learning disabled students. They found that when students were given an informal diagram or map, they were able to visualize how ideas meshed and were able to link them to their prior knowledge. Another advantage was that they were able to organize and construct their thoughts more efficiently. Their study concluded that greater comprehension gains may be due to the fact that semantic maps visually present all major points of the content.

Procedure. One type of semantic map that is well adapted to content area usage is a thematic map (Sinatra, et. al. 1984). The central theme is placed in the center, with key concepts and questions branching off the main idea. (Fig.2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Step 1 - The thematic map is placed on an overhead and students receive one in the form of a worksheet. The main theme is filled in, as well as topic questions and key vocabulary words.

Step 2 - The teacher develops with the students the key concepts and vocabulary, emphasizing what they will be looking for in their reading.

Step 3 - Students silently read the selection and fill in their worksheet as they are doing so.

The visual representation of all the elements of a particular lesson helps the student "see" the connection between the components.

Strategy #3 - Paired Repeated Reading

Rationale. When readers can recognize printed words quickly and accurately, they are able to focus their attention on identifying meaning (O'Shea and O'Shea, 1988). The Method of Repeated Reading is a strategy used to help students become fluent readers. In this model, the student practices until he is able to decode effectively enough to concentrate on comprehension. This strategy has been an effective tool used by classroom teachers to help students read more fluently. Paired Repeated Reading (an adaptation of the MRR) has shown to significantly improve fluency and comprehension in poor readers (Koskinen and Blum, 1986) It also can be used as a cooperative learning tool, where students work in pairs and practice reading to each other. In this manner, they offer each other positive reinforcement and evaluation. Their ultimate goal is fluency in decoding, thereby enabling them to concentrate on comprehension.

Procedure. In the paired repeated reading model offered by Koskinen and Blum (1986) students work in pairs but independently of the teacher. Therefore it is important that they understand the steps involved.

Step 1 - Initially, the purpose and importance of repeated reading is stressed to students. Of equal importance is the selection of material to be read and their positive feedback to each other. It should also be explained that repeated reading is not a contest and that pairing is a cooperative measure aimed at helping each other.

Step 2 - The students select their own material (about 50 words), taken from current instructional texts or readers. It is important that each student pick a different passage to eliminate competition.

Step 3 - Each student reads their passage silently and decides who will read first.

Step 4 - One student reads his passage aloud three times, during which he may ask his partner for help with a word. Koskinen and Blum (1986) suggest a self-evaluation sheet which the student would use to rate himself at this point. The listener would comment after the second and third reading, giving feedback on the reader's improvement. The listener would also utilize a listening sheet.

Step 5 - The same process begins again, with the students switching roles

Paired repeated reading allows partners to work cooperatively towards a common goal, which is to read fluently. The important factor is the practice that eventually will lead to fluency and ultimately comprehension.

Strategy #4 - Rapid Decoding With Flashcards

Rationale. The ability to decode rapidly and accurately is a skill that must be learned before comprehension can be achieved. When too much time is spent decoding, the words fade from memory before they can be linked to meaning (Blanchard, 1981). A student can achieve this skill by using flashcards. The strategy presented here is similar

to the MRR in that it allows the student to practice what is read. Rapid decoding aids in comprehension through complete word recognition and pronunciation (Blanchard, 1981).

Procedure. In the following strategy presented by Blanchard (1981), it is important that the vocabulary in the passage and questions are appropriate to the student's oral language, because being familiar with the words will benefit them the greatest. Recognizing and pronouncing words from their language experience activates connection to prior knowledge.

Step 1 - The teacher picks a passage of 100-200 words along with multiple choice questions.

Step 2 - She or the student lists all of the words from the passage and questions. The words are listed only once, regardless of how many times they appear in the passage.

Step 3 - A flashcard deck is created by putting each word on a different card.

Step 4 - The student practices rapid identification (within two seconds) and pronunciation until they are able to say them perfectly. Only after complete mastery of both the passage and question words is the student ready to read the selection.

Step 5 - The student reads the passage and answers the questions.

In this strategy, a teacher or partner can work with the student to help with identification or pronunciation. It it important that the student practice enough so that he can decode the words rapidly. He can then give his full attention to linking these new words to what he already knows.

Strategy #5 - The Neurological Impress Method (Modified)

Rationale. As with the flashcard skill just presented, the Neurological Impress Method is a strategy used to reach better word recognition and fluency through rapid decoding. Research has shown however, that general comprehension improves as well (Henk, 1983). The Neurological Impress Method (NIM) allows for student and teacher to

read in unison, at a pace faster than the student is normally accustomed to. Its goal is to read as many pages of material as time permits without causing physical discomfort (Kann, 1984). This helps the student read material that might have been too difficult before, giving him confidence and hopefully the desire to read. In particular, disabled readers benefit from this type of strategy because they witness parents and teachers modeling desirable reading behaviors (Kann, 1984). The modified NIM strategy suggested by Henk (1983) is designed to develop the reading-thinking process.

Procedure. In a true NIM model, the student's attention is never specifically focused on the meaning of the text (Henk, 1983). Therefore, the modification incorporates a regular reading program format, including pre-reading activities, modified NIM, skills development and enrichment (Henk, 1983).

Step 1 - The pre-reading activities would encompass vocabulary introduction, background story information and purpose. Semantic maps or the first step of the KWL strategy (What I Know) would also help to activate the student's thinking.

Step 2 - The teacher and students read the selection in unison. In order for the method to be the most effective for comprehension achievement in learning disabled students, the teacher would proceed one paragraph at a time, keeping in mind their individual needs. Since the student's performances will vary day to day and from topic to topic, the teacher needs to be careful about when and how to intervene.

Step 3 - As with any reading lesson, skill development and enrichment activities follow the reading.

By using the modified NIM either in a planned reading group or individually, comprehension gains can be achieved because the primary goal is fluency and confidence in reading. The modification of using the NIM in a structured reading program permits the students to concentrate on understanding what they read.

Strategy #6 - Visual Imagery and Verbal Mediation

Rationale. Creating a visual imagery system has proven to be an effective method of improving reading comprehension in learning disabled students. In order for a student to comprehend what is being read, he must be able to derive meaning from print (Flaro, 1987). Visual imagery allows the reader to associate what thay have read to personal experiences and past learnings. This can be accomplished by creating mental images of what is to be read and connecting it to what is already known. According to Levin (1973), an imagery system may not benefit children who lack prerequisite skills (such as decoding or vocabulary knowledge) but it can have a dramatic effect on the comprehension of children whose problems lie in organizational strategies and relationships of characters or concepts.

Procedure. The instructional strategy developed by Flaro (1987) stresses the need to explain the purpose, rationale and each step of the strategy to the students. Modeling each step is equally important, so that the students hear the teacher verbalize her thoughts. This strategy should be utilized with material which is on the level of the student's current achievement and should provide feedback regarding the use of the strategy.

Step 1 - The student reads a sentence or a paragraph, depending on his level.

Step 2 - The student is instructed to create a mental picture of what he has read based on what he already knows about the subject or on the illustrations and drawings provided in the story.

Step 3 - After creating a mental image, the student asks himself questions about the content of the material using Who, What, Where, When and Why,

Step 4 - The five questions should help the student create a more visually complete mental image, thus making the content more meaningful.

Step 5 - The teacher should provide the student with immediate verbal feedback regarding visualization and verbal mediation strategies (Flaro, 1987).

Use of the visual imagery and verbal mediation technique with learning disabled students has helped create meaningful associations between reading text and prior knowledge.

Conclusion. In order for learning disabled students to profit educationally, and for reading to be an enjoyable experience, meaning must be derived from print. The strategies presented in this paper are some of the many techniques researchers have found to be effective methods of remediating comprehension for students with learning disabilities. A top priority for teachers of learning disabled students should be planning appropriate reading programs designed to meet each student's individual needs. These instructional methods can contribute to significant improvements in the reading comprehension of learning disabled students if teachers take the time to explain the activities and practice them regularly. Although these strategies may not be effective for all students, teachers can be encouraged because they are uncomplicated, allowing teacher to experiment with the ones most suited to them and their students.

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Figure 1. Handout for the K-W-L strategy

1. K - What I Know

W - What I Want To Learn

L - Information I Have Learned and Still Need To Learn

2. Categories of Information I Expect To Use

A. D.

B. E

C. F.

Figure 2 Thematic map for a lesson about fossils.